

Sketch

Volume 50, Number 3

1984

Article 11

What Remains

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WHAT REMAINS

Flys, those little grey ones with the waxy, yellow abdomens, are everywhere, crawling across my legs on their way to the muskmelon rind on the porch railing; a few of them stop long enough to bite. And then I turn and — WHACK! — slap the spot where a half-second before one ripped out a tiny piece of my flesh, ripped it out . . . I re-read the last part of her letter one more time.

"This is not always easy. You've been a huge part of my life. You know me better than anyone. We've built some good things together, but right now I think I can build more with Dan . . . What do you think of trying something new?"

She can go to hell, that's what I think. I should never have asked her to come over. I fold the letter up and stuff it in my breast pocket. Across the street a bum, hunched over and swinging his right arm at his side, sings a Jesus song as he shuffles down the sidewalk: "though none go with him, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back." Somehow the September breeze is cold now; it rattles the leaves in the maple trees on the boulevard. I sit shivering, rubbing my arms, too lazy to go into the house to get my jacket.

I take a sip of the Budweiser I've opened and watch a fly try to suck some juice out of the melon rind, resting like a boat, orange and brown, on the white porch railing. I take another sip of the beer, bitter, cold, and prop my feet up beside the rind. I hate waiting.

A kid pedals by on a bicycle. His hair is shiny-blond, has that chlorine shine to it. A red book-bag hangs over his shoulders. I wave to him.

"Hey Mr. Avery!" the kid yells back.

I set my beer down on the railing and lean forward to see better. These contact lenses I just got are hell on my eyes, and with them on I can't see worth a damn, not yet anyway. I figured I'd look better without my glasses, wouldn't have "little pig eyes"; she said that when we had a fight once. If I squint hard, really pinch my eyes, I can just make him out, the neighbor's kid, Joey. He wanted me to fix his old Rupp Roadster mini-bike. He watched me work on cars in my garage — I like tinkering

with foreign ones, MG's, Healey's and now and then a Daimler or a Benz — so he figured I would know how to fix his mini-bike. Couldn't pass it up, not the way I came to it.

Joey turns up my driveway and pedals to the porch. The last few feet he goes at it too slow and wobbles so much he nearly falls.

"Watcha doin' there, Mr. Avery?" he says, rocking on the bike seat. "You get the plug fixed on the Rupp?"

The first time I saw Joey he was frantically yanking the starter cord on the Rupp. Ninety degree heat. Des Moines humidity. Sweat. I'd never seen anyone sweat like that — his t-shirt was nearly transparent with it. I walked across his folks' lawn to the driveway to see if I could start the bike.

It was a damned mess and I told him so. No spark, no compression. Anyway, Joey wouldn't look up at me. He wiped his nose, like he had a cold, and then he stammered, got a few words out before his voice quavered so bad he had to stop. He sniffed again, harder, and ran his forearm across his nose. From what he said I made out that, one, he bought the bike with his paper route money; two, the kid he bought the bike from said all it needed was a spark plug; and three, Joey's dad had laughed when he brought the Rupp home, had told Joey he'd really been taken. Four months of hard work gone — Poof!

I tried not to laugh — must have been fifteen years ago that I got a checkbook to make my route easier. The first week I had it I bought a worthless go-cart frame; my dad threw it in with the garbage after it sat in the garage for a few months. Eighty bucks worth of scrap iron.

So here Joey is asking me if I got his Rupp running yet. I looked down at my watch. Half past six.

"No, Joey, it isn't done." I force myself up from the lawn chair, "...but you've got to see this."

Joey follows me out to the garage behind my house, talking about the accelerated math class he's in. Accelerated reading, too, he says. I just nod every so often while he rambles on about exponents and how powerful they are.

There's a girl he's nuts about, told me himself.

"Boy, I'd sure like it if she'd dance with me at the teen-hop," he said. "She's real neat, and she's smart, too."

"What's she like?" I asked him.

"She's little, like a bird, with brown eyes..." I could see the pink in his cheeks.

"Cute, too, is she?" Joey's cheeks turned a deeper shade of red. The day Rachael told him no about the teen-dance he came over, his eyes glassy. Couldn't say a thing.

At the garage I unlock the door and reach inside to flip on the overhead light. I smell dry-rotted wood, oil, dust, and gasoline. Against one wall my tool chest is laid out: open end wrenches, socket wrenches, spanners, all chrome plated. On my work bench I've got the Rupp's Tecumseh motor bolted down.

"Gee," Joey says, his head craned to one side as if he expects the ceiling to come down at any second, "I thought you said you were gonna fix the roof." One beam is broken, sagging down toward the door.

Joey runs over to the workbench, stops a few feet from it. I check my watch again, catch the glare of the bare, two-hundred watt bulb overhead in the watch crystal. Nearly six forty. My dinner, simmering on the stove, must be mush by now.

"Jees, what happened to it?" Joey says.

I'm sure, to Joey, the Rupp must look like it's beyond repair — it's wheels hang from the west wall on wooden dowels, and the frame, covered by a layer of greasy dust, lies on its side by some old tires.

"You'll be surprised," I say, smiling.

"Sure."

I laugh, he stares down at the dirt floor, kicks at a screwdriver, one with a broken handle. I feel good, first time all day. Wait till he sees this, I think. Think, sometimes I wish I didn't. Her eyes, grey-blue. If you only knew kid...

"Joey, I got the motor all together. New carburetor, new coil, new piston. Didn't need a new spark plug, the old one was okay. Got the parts from a power-tool company." I set my hand on his shoulder, soft cotton.

I can tell he doesn't believe the motor will run. He picks up the old piston on the right side of the workbench and looks at the hole in it, sets it back down and wipes his hands on his Washington Monument t-shirt. Black streaks. His mother will just love me for that.

"That hole isn't supposed to be there, is it?" he says, pointing to the piston.

"Nope."

I step over to the bench and grab the rope starter handle and brace my right leg against the bottom of the bench.

"Ready?"

"For what?" Joey stares up at me.

I yank the cord hard and the engine backfires once, bang, spits flame out the exhaust pipe, and then clatters into a steady roar. Deafening. Memories. In the soft light of her parent's basement, lying on her back on that old mohair couch, her arms outstretched, her breasts beneath my hands, so...alive, her waiting lips, wet, and her thighs, parted, hips rising to meet me. "You're the only one, John Avery."

Joey's teeth are like shells, big white shells.

"Here! I yell over the din, "Try This!"

I take Joey's right hand, put his index finger on the throttle and push down. The engine roars, louder, softer, falls and rises, falls and rises, blows black exhaust, smelling of burned oil, into the garage. I flip on the choke and the motor coughs twice and stops. My ears are ringing and Joey is dancing around now, jumping up and down. I feel sick to my stomach. I imagine *him* meeting her in that basement, the mohair couch, her breasts...

"Wait'll they see this," Joey says.

He wants to know when I'll finish the rest of the bike. I tell him I don't know.

Back on the porch I can smell dinner through the window that opens into my apartment. Thyme, oregano, garlic, rosemary. Rosemary. My dinner still simmering on the stove. Low heat. Her sex beneath my hand, her arching back and smooth, downy stomach, spring, the lilacs I picked for her, the sweet scent; and then that dirt road out in the middle of nowhere, moving with the rhythm of the shoulder high corn swaying in the August heat. Her warm lips on my ear, "Don't ever leave me, John Avery."

"Gee, that smells great," Joey says.

"You think so?" I drop into my deck chair again, prop my feet up beside the melon rind on the railing.

"Yeah, whatever it is. Smells like spaghetti." Joey sniffs the air, smiles.

And then it occurs to me.

"You eaten yet, Joey?" His pudgy face lights up, all cheeks and teeth.

"Really?" he says.

"No kidding. I got enough for both of us."

Joey sprints home across his folks' lawn, now dead and brown from the September drought. The goddamned flies are still crawling on the rind, all that remains of the melon. Got it right off the vine. Next it's maggots. Everything dies. I feel like I can't breathe right, like I'm suffocating.

Joey's taking his time asking his mother about dinner and I wonder if he'll be back, but then I hear a screen door slam and there's Joey jogging across the lawn, his fat legs rubbing, bow-legged, a big smile on his face. I have the most intense desire to hug him, tell him everything is okay, that Rachel doesn't know what she's missing.

He stomps up the porch steps, wheezes from the short run.
"My mom told me... I can eat here... tonight," he says, squeezing the words out between gulps of air. "Don't get up..."

He stands in front of me, his eyes darting from side to side, hiding something behind his back. I wonder if his mother gave him hell about the grease smudge on his shirt — he's wearing a plain white one now.

"Close your eyes," he says.

I do. I can smell soap on Joey's hands, Irish Spring.

"Put out your hands."

"Is it alive?"

"No."

Something rustles. *Leaves?*

I put out my hands; he drops what feels like a newspaper into them.

"Now?"

"Open your eyes!"

Joey has turned it over so the backside is facing up — ads for X-ray glasses. Some guy is looking at his hand. With the glasses on it looks like a skeleton's, just bones.

"Look at the cover," Joey says. He rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet.

I flop the comic book over.

MAGNUS ROBOT FIGHTER 2400

Under the title there is a hero with Superman's build, but green and scaly, like a reptile, bashing some bug-eyed robots all to bits.

"It's my favorite one," Joey says.

I try to give it back to him but he won't take it. I like the pictures — they're all dated, done in an art-decco style. Red reds, blue blues. Now *my* cheeks are flushed, and I hope Joey can't tell. I don't like the idea of crying in front of him.

In the kitchen I fix up two plates of linguini, hoping Joey will even taste the stuff. Some kids don't like spinach, so I'm not sure he'll like the spinach noodles.

Joey opens the porch screen-door for me. He throws himself down into one of the lawn chairs, the one nearest the door, and I hand him his plate and silverware and he smells the linguini, pokes at the green noodles with the fork and then takes a small bite. He smiles.

"Jees, this is great," he says.

Inside the phone is ringing. Five, six, ten rings.

"Aren't you gonna answer your phone?" Joey asks, stuffing more linguini into his mouth, packing it in with his fork.

I bang the front door behind me, cross the living room to the kitchen where the phone is ringing, jarring my nerves. Answer. Answer.

I pick up the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello, John. Say I know..."

Yes, you sure do know, I think. I've heard this before. Right. Uh huh. Yeah, I understand.

"Are you listening?" she says. Her voice is soft, gentle.

"Sure..."

Where is he now? Did you do it with him last night. Is he better than me? When I think of him inside her I ache.

"David, is something wrong?"

Hell no, I'm not bothered a bit. Him thrusting inside her, inside me. There is a hum on the line, high-pitched.

"Are you there?" she says.

"Yeah..."

"... You got my letter."

"Uh huh."

"... I'm sorry. You should have gotten it tomorrow, but..."

I realize the hum is in my head, not the phone.

"Rosemary, I can't take this shit anymore." I ram the receiver into its cradle. My brain feels like it's on fire. Crisp. The phone starts to ring again and I grab the cord, jerk the plug out of the wall, Jesus Fucking Christ! slam the goddamned phone against the refrigerator. The bell dings as the plastic breaks. Please, please, please.

"You okay in there, Mr. Avery?" Joey yells through the window.

On the porch Joey pokes around the last bit of his linguini. I go in with our plates for more food. While I'm scooping out the sauce and noodles onto our plates, it occurs to me that I could plug the phone back in. I can hear Joey reading from the **MAGNUS ROBOT FIGHTER** comic book; his voice reminds me of Rosemary's. "I love you, John Avery. Touch me..."

In three steps I'm out of the kitchen, and then onto the porch. I hand Joey his plate, still can't believe he wants to eat more.

"Who was that on the phone?" Joey asks. I can tell he's watching me, wondering why I shove so much linguini into my mouth, why I keep wiping at my eyes with the napkin. I'll say something when I'm done choking, gasping for breath. But Joey, he clears his throat.

"It's okay, Mr. Avery," he says. "It's okay."